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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Box-Car Children: Building The Dam (8/17)

Even a hammer makes a good pillow if one is tired enough, and the freight-car family slept until the nine-o'clock church bells began to ring faintly in the valley. There were at least a dozen churches, and their far-away bells sounded sweetly harmonious in so many different keys.

"They almost play a tune," said Violet, as she listened.

"I like music all right," replied Henry in a business-like way, "but I for one shall have to get to work."

"This will be a good day to wash all the stockings," said Jess. "We'll all be wading so much in the brook, anyway."

After breakfast the first thing Henry did was to survey, with critical eyes, the spot they had chosen for a pool. It was a hollow about three yards across. There were no stones in it at all.

"It's big enough already," remarked Henry at last, "but it hasn't enough water in it." He measured its depth with a stick. "We'll have to guess at inches," he said.

"I have a little tape measure in my workbag," ventured his sister Violet.

Henry flashed a smile at her. "Is there anything you haven't got in your workbag?" he asked her.

The children measured the wet stick carefully. The water was just ten inches deep in the deepest part. Henry explained his plan of engineering to his sisters. "We will have to haul some big logs across this narrow part and stuff them from this end with stones and underbrush. It ought to be three feet deep before we get through."

"O Henry!" protested Jess. "Benny would get drowned." "Drowned!" echoed Henry. "How tall do you think he is, anyhow?"

They measured the little boy and found him to be forty-two inches tall. That settled it; the pool was designed to be three feet in depth.

Luckily the largest logs were not far away; but as it was, it was a matter of great labor for the builders to drag them to the scene of operations.

"Let's get all the logs up here first," suggested Jess.

"Then we can have the fun of laying them across."

The two older children dragged all the logs, while Violet and Benny attended to the stones, with the help of the cart. Occasionally Henry was called upon to assist with a heavy stone, but for the most part Benny puffed out his cheeks and heaved the stones himself. In fact, Henry decided at this point to let Benny drop them into the water as he gathered them. "Splash 'em right in, old fellow," he directed. "Only keep them in a nice straight line right across this place between these two trees. It won't make any difference how wet he gets," he added in an aside to Jess. "We can dry him in the sun."

Jess thought a little differently, although she said nothing. She took off Benny's little crinkled blouse and one pair of bloomers, and started to hang them on the line.

"Good time to wash them!" she exclaimed.

"Let me wash them," begged Violet. "You're more useful building the dam." There was wisdom in this suggestion, so Jess accepted it gratefully, and even added Henry's blouse to the laundry.

"When we finish the dam they will surely be dry," she said.

As for Henry, he was only too glad to work without it.

"Makes me feel lighter," he declared.

Rare and beautiful birds came and watched the barefooted children as they scurried around, building their wall of masonry. But the children did not have any eyes for birds then. They watched with delighted eyes as each stone was added to the wall under the clear water, and it began to rise almost to the surface.

"That makes a solid foundation for the logs, you see," explained Henry with pride. "They won't be floating off downstream the minute we lay them on."

Then at last the time arrived when they were to lay the logs on.

"Let's wedge the first one between these two trees," said Jess, with a happy thought. "Then if each end of the log is on the upper side of the trees, the harder the water pounds the tighter the dam gets."

"Good work!" exclaimed Henry admiringly. "That's just what we'll do."

But the children were not at all prepared for what happened the moment the first big log was splashed into its place on top of the stone wall.

The water, defeated in its course down the rocky bed, gurgled and chased about as it met the opposing log, and found every possible hole to escape.

"Leaks," said Henry briefly, as the water began to rush around both ends and pour over the top of the log.

"We'll make the logs so thick it can't get through. We'll lay three logs across, with three logs on top of them, and three more on top of that."

The children set about stubbornly to accomplish this. Violet held great sprays of fine underbrush in place until each log was laid. Wetter children never were seen. But nobody cared. They resolutely plugged the ends with more stones, more underbrush, and more logs. Each time a leak was discovered, someone dropped a stone over it. Even Benny caught the fever of conquering the mischievous water which slipped from their grasp like quicksilver.

When the three top logs were at last dropped into place, the excited children sat down to watch the pool fill. This it did slowly.

Finding now no means of exit, the water was quieter. It rose steadily up the barricade of logs. It widened beautifully. Henry could not sit still. "It slopes!" he cried. "See how clear it is! And still! See how still it is!" And then the water began to overflow the logs. It spilled over the top with a delightful curve. And on the other side it formed a second waterfall—not high and

narrow and graceful like the natural fall above, but very low and wide. "Just like a regular mill dam," said Henry.

He held the measuring stick out as far as he could and plunged it into the water. It lacked an inch of being three feet deep.

"Deep enough," he declared. In fact it looked so deep that Benny could not conceal a slight fear.

"That's the beauty of the slope," observed Jess. "Benny can wade in just as far as he wants to, and no farther. We all know what the bed of the pool is like—no holes or stones."

The girls had to leave to prepare dinner, but Henry could not be persuaded to leave the wonderful swimming pool. "I'd rather swim than eat," he said. Luckily for the children, their supply of provisions was the largest of any day since their flight. The girls lighted the fire and heated up the remainder of the stew and cut the bread. The butter, hard and cold in the refrigerator, was taken out, and four portions cut from it. The two doughnuts made four half rings for dessert.

The cooks rang the dinner bell. This was an ingenious arrangement hung on a low branch. It consisted of a piece of bent steel swung on a string. Violet hit it



sharply with another piece of steel. It sounded deeply and musically through the woods, and the boys understood it and obeyed at once.

It was evident the moment they appeared that at least three of the family had been swimming. Watch shook himself violently at intervals, spattering water drops in all directions. Henry and Benny, fresh and radiant, with plastered hair and clean dry stockings and blouses, apparently liked to swim and eat, too.

"You can actually swim a few strokes in it, Jess, if you're careful," Henry said, with excusable pride, as he sat down to dinner.

Building a dam is wonderful sauce for a dinner. "I think stew is much better the second day," observed Benny, eating hungrily.

There remained two more adventures for the eventful day. The girls cut their hair. Violet's dark curls came off first. "They're awfully in the way," explained Violet, "and so much trouble when you're working."

They were tangled, too, and Jess cut them off evenly by a string, with Violet's little scissors. Jess' chestnut hair was long and silky and nicely braided, but she never murmured as it came off too. The two girls ran to the brook mirror to see how they looked. The new haircut was very becoming to both.

"I like you better that way," said Henry approvingly.

"Lots more sensible when you're living in the woods."

Around four o'clock the children took a long walk in the opposite direction from any of their other explorations.

They were rewarded by two discoveries. One was a

hollow tree literally filled with walnuts, gathered presumably by a thrifty squirrel the previous fall. The other discovery frightened them a little just at first. For with bristling back and a loud bark, Watch suddenly began to rout out something in the leaves, and that something began to cackle and half run and half fly from the intruders. It was a runaway hen. The children succeeded in catching the dog and reducing him to order, although it was clear he liked very much to chase hens.

"She had some eggs, too," remarked Benny as if trying to make pleasant conversation.

Jess bent over incredulously and saw a rude nest in the moss in which there were five eggs.

"A runaway hen!" said Henry, hardly believing his eyes.

"She wants to hide her nest and raise chickens."

The children had no scruples at all about taking the eggs.

"Almost a gift from heaven," said Violet, stroking one of the eggs with a delicate finger. "It wouldn't be polite to refuse them."

Scrambled eggs made a delicious supper for the children. Jess broke all the eggs into the biggest bowl and beat them vigorously with a spoon until they were light and foamy. Then she added milk and salt and delegated Violet to beat them some more while she prepared the fire. The big kettle, empty and clean, was hung over the low fire and butter was dropped in. Jess watched it anxiously, tipping the kettle slightly in all directions. When the butter had reached the exact

shade of brown, Jess poured in the eggs and stirred them carefully, holding her skirts away from the fire. She was amply repaid for her care when she saw her family attack the meal. Clearly this was a feast day.

"We shall have to be satisfied tomorrow to live on bread and milk," she observed, scraping up the last delicious morsel.

But when tomorrow came they had more than bread and milk, as you will soon see.